

THE ANTIOCH CHURCH

Acts 11:1-30

Key Verses: 11:25-26

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

When people talk about a church, they usually imagine a building with steeple or a religious denomination. The Greek term for church in the New Testament is *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) while Jewish people were more familiar with the terms like “assembly” (Dt 18:16) or “congregation” (Ps 26:12). We know that church is more than a building. It is a community of believers who believe in Jesus and obey his words. Some people like one church over another for some reasons. So what is an ideal church? In today’s passage, the Antioch church emerges as a model church. Let us think about the characters of the church that we can learn and follow.

I. GOD GAVE GENTILES THE SAME GIFT (1-18)

Look at verse 1. *“The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.”* This happened when Peter visited Cornelius’ house. As Peter preached the message of Jesus’ death for the forgiveness of sins and his resurrection for eternal life, the word of God moved the hearts of the people who were gathered there. Then the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to praise God, speaking in tongues. We may call the event “the Gentile Pentecost.” The burden of sin was lifted from them. The hope of eternal life filled their hearts. This was a water-shed moment for Peter and the church. The Jewish Christians realized that God accepts the Gentiles as his own children. The Holy Spirit came upon them just as he did on the Jewish believers. It was a wonderful day in Christian history. The news spread throughout Judea.

However, not everyone was happy to hear about the news. Some Jewish Christians criticized Peter for entering the house of uncircumcised men and eating with them. To them preaching the gospel to Gentiles was one thing, but eating with them was unthinkable. Until this time, disciples of Jesus were all Jews. Now the Holy Spirit accepted Gentiles. But some Jewish Christians were reluctant to accept them as their brothers and sisters. They held on to the Judaism. It was their human pride. They went against the Holy Spirit. We also must be careful not to hold on to our fixed ideas to the point of denying the work of the Holy Spirit. May God help us to be humble so that we may follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit!

How did Peter help his fellow Jewish believers? He could have said, “Listen, I am Peter, the Rock. I have authority over you. You must listen to me.” But he did not. He spoke to them as a fellow Jew. He told them how God led him to accept the Gentile believers. He gave them a personal testimony, highlighting the fact that it was God who

told him to accept the Gentiles. It was the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter's answer to them had two parts.

In verses 4-10, Peter recounted the details of the vision that God had given him while he was praying. God's message to him was, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." God declared that his grace of salvation was also extended to the Gentiles. Jesus died for the sins of the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

Next, Peter explained how God arranged his meeting with Cornelius. The meeting happened because God gave the same vision to Peter and Cornelius. He included all the details to convince them that it was indeed God who led him to Cornelius. Most of all, Peter told them how the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles (15-17). His conclusion is in verse 17: "*So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?*" Peter had resisted to the idea of reaching out to the Gentiles. But God made it clear to him that faith in Jesus is the only way for salvation. Anyone who believes in Jesus can receive the gift of eternal life. Sin does not discriminate between Jews and Gentiles. God does not discriminate between Jews and Gentiles. God saves everyone who believes in Jesus.

When the Jewish Christians heard Peter's explanation about the work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles, they had no further objections. Their disdain for the Gentiles vanished. They praised God saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life" (18). To Luke, the evangelist and historian, who was also a Gentile, this was a historic moment for the church. A door was opened for the gospel to spread to the ends of the earth. But as we will see, God had already begun this work.

II. THE CHARACTERS OF THE ANTIOCH CHURCH (19-30)

Look at verse 19. *Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.* Because of the great persecution, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were forced to go out to other places. Their travels took them to places like Phoenicia (today's Lebanon), Cyprus (an island in the Mediterranean), and Antioch (a big city in Syria). They preached the good news of Jesus, but only among Jews. Their hearts were not open to the Gentiles. They knew what Jesus said in Acts 1:8. But they had prejudice against the Gentiles. This barrier in their minds prevented them from sharing the good news with those who needed it.

Not all Jewish Christians were close-minded towards Gentiles. Look at verse 20. *Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.* These nameless Christians made history when they began to share the gospel of Jesus with the Greeks in the city. Antioch at that time was the third largest city in the Roman world, next to Rome and Alexandria. Located in Syria, about 16 miles from the Mediterranean, it was a cosmopolitan city of 500,000 people, with its main streets lined with magnificent mansions. It was famous for its chariot racing and gambling. It was also known for its immorality. It was a city of nightclubs and sports, perhaps similar to New York or Los

Angeles today. What happened when the good news about the Lord Jesus was preached to the people in the city? The word of God moved their hearts. A great ministry of God began.

The Antioch church was the first Christian church in a Gentile city. It became a model church for all other churches. Even today, we can learn what a church should be from the Antioch church. Let's think about several characters of the church.

First, the Antioch church had the word of God (19-21). Verse 20 says that some Christian men began to preach the good news of the Lord Jesus to Greeks. Then what happened? Look at verse 21. *The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.* God was with his servants when they preached the good news. A large number of people believed and turned to the Lord. How? It was because the Lord's hand was with them. This was the secret. The Lord was with them when they preached the gospel of Jesus. The people of Antioch were steeped in a sinful culture and pleasure-seeking lifestyle. But they turned to the Lord when their hearts were touched by the word of God. The word of God has a life-giving power in it. It can penetrate even the hearts of playboys and playgirls. When the people of Antioch were touched by the word of God, their thirsty souls were quenched. They tasted the joy of knowing the love of God. This joy was fundamentally different from their pleasures from one-night stand or winning a poker hand. They felt like dancing because of their new hope in God. Their sinful desires were replaced by holy desires. When the word of God touched their hearts, they no longer suffered from their vague anxieties about uncertain future and their fear of death. The word of God gave them assurance of salvation and eternal life. Before, they used to be slaves of sin and Satan, but now they were free from the bondage of sin and Satan. They turned their hearts to God to serve him freely without fear (Lk 1:74-75). From the beginning, the Antioch church was a church where the word of God was taught and obeyed.

Second, the Antioch church had humble leaders (22-26). News of the work of God reached the mother church in Jerusalem. The church leaders were prayerful about God's work growing there. They decided to send Barnabas, an influential leader, to Antioch. This was a very important decision. If they had sent someone with a narrow mind, he could have noticed only the negative aspects of the new church. But Barnabas had a big heart. More importantly, he had the spiritual eyes to see everything from God's point of view. Barnabas had sponsored Saul when all men had suspected him because of his ugly past (9:26-27). Barnabas also had supported sacrificially the needy believers (4:36-37). The church chose a right person to send.

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch and saw what the grace of God had done there, what was his reaction? It says that he was glad (23). There was no hint of jealousy. He did not compare his ministry in Jerusalem with that of Antioch. Instead, he saw the grace of God working among the Gentiles and he was happy. He saw the work of God with the eyes of God. Barnabas was a man of God. What did he do for the believers in Antioch? He encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts (23). Thanks to Barnabas, the church in Antioch was not crushed but encouraged. The author

Luke comments in verse 24, *“He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.”*

Barnabas did not go back to Jerusalem. He became a member of the ministry and actively participated in the work of God in Antioch. As the church grew in number, Barnabas saw a need for more Bible teachers. Then he remembered Saul. He went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch (26). Now we have not heard about Saul for about 10 years. The last time we read about Saul was in Chapter 9, when he went to his hometown Tarsus in order to escape the Jewish plot to kill him (9:30). The Bible does not say what Saul did in Tarsus during these years. Most likely he was preparing himself to be a chosen instrument of God to carry the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles (9:15). It was there Paul put together what he would later call “my gospel” (Ro 2:16). God was preparing him to be a great evangelist during the quiet years.

Barnabas could have made the Antioch believers his own flock of sheep by teaching them all by himself. But he humbled himself and invited Saul who was a more powerful teacher than he. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people (26). They taught them the word of God. Given their personal characters, we can imagine that it was mainly Paul who taught the Bible and rebuked them to repent, while Barnabas counseled and babysat patiently their Bible students day and night, giving them words of encouragement and serving them with delicious food. This way, the two disciples co-worked together to serve the Lord. What a beautiful story this is! May God bless our coworkers to serve young students with the word of God like this! May the Lord bless each of us to be humble leaders like Barnabas!

Third, the Antioch church followed Jesus. Verse 26 says that *the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch*. When the people of Antioch called the believers “Christians,” they meant it to be a derogatory name. In their eyes, Christians followed a guy named Jesus, whom they considered as a loser who was executed by the Roman soldiers. They laughed at the Christians because they were studying the Bible diligently while others were enjoying the chariot racing on Saturdays. The Christians loved the Lord Jesus more than money, which seemed strange to their eyes. Once their friends became believers, they stopped coming to their parties on Sundays. Instead, they went to church to worship the Lord. They could not understand it. How could they give up all the fun in life in order to study the Bible and pray? They began to look down on the believers as hopeless losers. They began to call them “Christians.” But the believers did not mind the name. In fact, they were happy to be called “Christians.” They were happy to be identified as the followers of Jesus Christ.

A Christian is a person in Christ—a person belonging to Christ. The believers in Antioch gained this unique identity because they followed and imitated Christ. They were full of affection for Christ. They were crazy about Jesus. They followed Jesus because they believed that he is the way, the truth and the life. They wanted to do things that Christ did. They wanted to do things for Christ. We are also called “Christians.” May we live up to this title!

Fourth, the Antioch church had a spirit of giving (27-30). Look at verses 27-28. *During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)* When the severe famine spread over the entire Roman world, the people of Antioch also suffered. The severe recession hit everyone. Many were laid off from their jobs. But the disciples in Antioch made a decision to help financially the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. They brought offerings according to their ability. Some made large contributions anonymously. Even slaves brought some money for the cause. This act of giving proved that they really knew God's grace personally. The Antioch Christians had a spirit of giving.

After collecting money, they sent the gift through Barnabas and Paul. In times of destitution, people tend to be selfish. But the disciples in Antioch were different. They learned a spirit of giving from their Bible studies and practiced what they learned. They knew the love of God who sent his one and only Son to save sinners. We give because God first gave us. St. Paul said, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2Co 8:9). The Antioch Christians accepted the words of Christ: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Ac 20:35). Giving in the name of Christ is not losing. It is an expression of thanksgiving to God. Those who give to others, even a cup of water, are true disciples of Jesus Christ. We give because Jesus first gave us—his own life as a ransom for our sins!

Fifth, the Antioch church was a Spirit-filled, mission-oriented, cross-cultural community that prayed earnestly. There are other characters of the Antioch church that we can all learn and emulate. It was a church led by the Holy Spirit (24,28). They made decisions after praying together so that they could obey the Spirit. They were a multi-ethnic, cross-cultural community. Jews and Gentiles loved one another as brothers and sisters. Most of all, it was a world-mission oriented church. We will explore these characters in more details as we continue to study this book. For now, let us look at Acts 13:2-3, "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

In conclusion, the Antioch church had the word of God. There were many dedicated Bible teachers. They studied and taught the word of God with humility. They prayed and followed the Holy Spirit. They imitated the life of Jesus. The church also had a giving spirit. They loved God and other Christian brothers more than money. When they did this, God was ready to use them for his world redemptive purpose. May God help us to be like the Antioch church!